

## **HUMANITIES RESEARCH PAPER 2017**

Topic: An Ethical Reading of Ayn Rand's *Anthem*

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Class: 4H1

### **Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

Student's Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sean Woon Yukai', written over a light blue grid background.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What's known about Rand within literary and philosophical circles is usually limited to her revolutionary philosophy known as Objectivism. Promoting three values – reason, purpose, and self-esteem – to be the supreme virtue of an individual (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1999), it is described by herself to be a complete philosophy. Positing that there is an objective reality; that knowledge is derived through reason; that self-interest is the guiding ethic, and that capitalism is the ideal political system, she forwards a unique blend of egoism and humanism. Therefore, it is in the development of this philosophy that she writes *Anthem*.

The book *Anthem* (whose working title was *Ego*) is a dystopian novella set in a future age where the concept of individuality has been exterminated. *Anthem* is a work of fiction, but beneath the surface, it can be characterised as a philosophical treatise. It brings readers on an intense exploration of the logical extremities of Objectivism, and in doing so, critiques the opposite paradigm, Marxism (Rand & Peikoff, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 1979). *Anthem* is a marked departure from her usual style of romantic realism into fantasy, sometimes even more poetry than prose (Merrill & Enright, 2013), creating an intentionally dystopian world constructed precisely to let readers experience the full philosophy that is Objectivism. The actual events range from improbable to impossible, but by creating an extreme circumstance that forces characters into a binary, it forwards the most radical interpretation of Objectivism yet. In this world, Rand's hero-figures then forward what could seem as another Categorical Imperative – not only suggesting Objectivism as an ethical ideology but also suggesting that it is a moral imperative. *Anthem* insinuates, through the revolt and protest of the main character against the stifling and didactic society he lives in, that the solution to escaping an oppressive collectivist society is to rely on one's intellect and rationality. The book paints the act of thought and the act of innovation as being tantamount to a person's moral obligation; and that without it people will be a part of, and subscribing to, an oppressive society. Hence *Anthem* creates for the reader a dichotomy between individualism and collectivism and pits the two as opposing forces of good and evil.

Therefore, this paper aims to utilise ethical criticism to elucidate what notion of morality Rand is forwarding in *Anthem*, primarily looking at how the ethical and epistemological roots of Objectivism are manifested through the assessment of the character-to-character interactions, power structures and the notion of the ideal life within the text.

Ethical criticism is significant in this context as Objectivism promotes the lifestyle of the Randian hero, and her moral framework premised upon the capacity for a real-world embodiment of such a lifestyle. Hence, it is important to understand not only on what the

Randian hero's version of ethics are but also to examine what its ramifications on the individual and the rest of society are. This then allows Objectivism to be understood better.

### **1.1 Rationale**

There is a large chasm in the academic analysis of Rand's works, leaving many yet to be properly explored even 35 years after her death. As Mimi Reisel Gladstein, author of the Ayn Rand Companion puts it, "In mainstream academic journals, the 1970s were generally devoid of Rand literary criticism" (Gladstein, 2003). While this paucity of critical analysis has recently been alleviated by creation of journals such as The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies in the fall of 1999 as well as Kirsti Minsaas' Structure and Meaning in Ayn Rand's Novels (Minsaas, 1994), authors traditionally favour analysing Rand the philosopher, ethician, or political theorist. Thus, little attention has thus far been paid to understanding Rand as a literary artist that crafts her works for the purpose of providing a visceral and stark portrayal to her philosophies; works with brilliant plotting, thematic grandeur and unity, and imagery. Furthermore, much more analysis is devoted to what is considered her *magnum opus* – *Atlas Shrugged* – yet little of this attention is shared with the equally compelling piece of literature that is *Anthem*.

However, as a philosopher who publishes her philosophies through fiction rather than treatises, our understanding of Objectivism as a unified philosophy is conditioned upon understanding how her three branches of philosophy – ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics – interact with the characters of her novels. Crucially, however, her philosophy only answers questions of metaphysics – knowing that the world and what we observe are absolutes – and epistemology – knowing how we can learn of those absolutes. She only hints at what the ideal life should look like, and ethics is instead treated like an obvious extension from the frameworks. Therefore, explicitly characterizing from an ethical standpoint what her philosophy of Objectivism means in *Anthem* should be taken to understand the implications of such a worldview.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

What is *Anthem* suggesting about morality?

How are heroes used to depict the ideal life?

How does Rand justify the epistemological origins of her philosophy?

### **1.3 Thesis Statement**

*Anthem* is a statement that rational self-interest or the *homo economicus* archetype is an a priori moral end, thus deriving self-actualisation when rational thought is exercised to its fullest extent.

## **1.4 Methodology**

This paper will use the lens of ethical criticism to analyse Anthem. Ethical criticism is predicated on the fact that art is indeed political, a product of societal mores and power relations, and hence that the literary artefact and its readers have ethical and moral lives that intersect, and its interactions are interpersonal and on a platform by which readers are able to relate to the text (Davis & Womack, 1998). Furthermore, the goal of ethical literary criticism is to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works (Zhenzhao, 2004); this allows an understanding into conceptions of morality by the author (Gexin, 2017).

Ethical criticism is also largely based on the inalienable part of the reading experience that involves the reader projecting their own value systems into the narrative, a process by which ethical transcend the boundaries of the text. This thus recognizes the pluralities of the human condition and allows realization of the differences and similarities between value systems. This phenomenon is known as “moral agency”, as defined by Lynne Tirrell (Storytelling and Moral Agency, 1990).

The notion of ethical criticism is also inherently humanistic. It rejects the segregation of text as an art form in and of itself but instead contains ethical statements that are relevant to the localized practices of autonomous individuals and entities. As S. L. Goldberg perceptively recognizes in *Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature* (1993), “there is no unwritten constitutional rule about what everyone should mean by ‘moral’”. Ethical criticism both strives to address the way individuals arrive at their decisions and assesses how the results of those choices affect the larger human community in which we live in.

Furthermore, ethical criticism is only useful if utilised in conjunction with the process of comparative literature, which emphasises on the intersectionality of text and diverse interpretations of morality (Totsy de Zepetnek, 1998). Therefore, the goal of the analysis would be understanding the methods through which Rand derives her Objectivist framework through comparisons to popular philosophical tropes such as the Übermensch and the Promethean hero, as well as the very biblical and poetic style used.

Thus, through understanding Rand’s depictions of common ethical philosophical concepts, *inter alia*, the moral imperative and the construct of self-worth within her character’s actions, Rand’s interpretation of what constitutes a moral act within Objectivism can be derived.

## **1.5 Scope and Limitations**

This study does not claim to have a full understanding of all the literary, cultural and academic influences of Rand’s work, as Objectivism indeed was always in a state of flux. For example,

when she wrote *Atlas Shrugged* she had removed all agreement with Nietzsche's philosophy but instead solidified other aspects of her philosophy, notably the systems of governance. Hence this study will solely be about *Anthem*, and would not attempt a comparison with other works of hers or other similar fictions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Philosophical Heroes

#### 2.1.1 Aristotle

Ayn Rand herself has used absolute language to solidify her stance on Aristotle as the deserving founder of philosophy, claiming that “Aristotle, the father of logic, should be given the title of the world’s first intellectual, in the purest and noblest sense of that word” (Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 1961). As such, her iconic phrase “A is An” is indeed lifted from Aristotle’s work.

Aristotle’s own writing categorises five types of ‘essence’<sup>1</sup> when talking about epistemology, and his descriptions are loosely translated as follows: *to ti esti* (the what it is); *to einai* (being); *ousia* (being); *hoper esti* (precisely what something is) and; *to ti ên einai* (the what it was meant to be) (Hussey, 1983). Among these, the last locution is the most peculiar, meaning ‘that which it was for an instance of kind K to be an instance of kind K’; implying therefore that for identification of an entity, we need to know an objective set of facts mutually exclusive to that entity, and which also explains all other features common across the range of that entity (Shields, 2016). Furthermore, Aristotle identifies a teleological framework from which he analyses what the nature of happiness (*eudaimonia*) is. He identifies relates intrinsic humanity with reason, which then provides ample grounds for characterizing the happy life as involving centrally the exercise of reason, whether practical or theoretical. Happiness turns out to be an act of the rational soul, conducted in accordance with virtue or excellence, otherwise seen as rational activity executed excellently (Meyer, 1992). Therefore, this is largely congruent with Rand’s view of man as a rational animal but differs in claiming that a person has a responsibility to perform virtuous activities, an imperative never actually claimed by Rand.

#### 2.1.2 Nietzsche’s Übermensch

Another philosopher Rand is often compared to is Friedrich Nietzsche, and the comparison is often made between the Randian hero and the Übermensch. Nietzsche’s hero first appeared in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche F. W., 2003) as an alternative to the death of God. Nietzsche opines that “Europe no longer needed God as the source of all morality, value, or order in the universe; philosophy and science were capable of doing that for us” (Hendricks, 2016); but to prevent nihilism prevailing, the Übermensch could be the new creator of values based on life-affirming and creative principles (Nietzsche F. , 1967). Rand is also seen as lauding the overriding importance of productive work when she argues that “productive work is the road to man’s unlimited achievement” (Rand, *The Objectivist Ethics*, 1961). In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Other critics use the term “whatness” to mean the nature of entities and ideas as characterised by Aristotle

greater importance was placed on the exercising of creative faculties above and beyond simple work. She has instead established an ethic of creation, that man should be celebrated when they endure and struggle through the process of innovation to achieve, and by extension bestowing upon humanity a gift of ideas (Montmarquet, 2011). Yet Rand herself later splits ways with Nietzsche apart from agreeing that morality is in the service of life – there is disagreement on causality; consciousness; the validity of sensation, logic, and reason; and even whether rationality even is a virtue (Hicks, 2011). Hence, this is all the more reason to see what extent the concept of the *Übermensch* was appropriated into the Randian hero of *Anthem*.

### **2.1.3 The Promethean Hero**

To that end, perhaps it remains more useful to compare the Randian hero to the Promethean hero, as Rand herself made the allusion in Howard Roark's trial speech in *The Fountainhead*: "Prometheus was chained to a rock and torn by cultures – because he had stolen the fire of the gods" (Rand, 1943). A Prometheus ethics is a world in which the individual is committed to a future that is considerably better than the present – rejecting preventable misfortune or suffering, and defying nature to improve the human condition. Prometheus represents the bold innovator who stands against suffering and the evils of the *status quo* (Kohl, 1996). Therefore, the similarities between the Randian hero and the Promethean hero are obvious – the glorification of creation and the recognition that it is a moral end. This then is where a large paradox can be observed, between the rational self-interest that is always upheld in the Randian hero, and the necessity for suffering as a part of the innovative process (Montmarquet, 2011). These two principles seem largely irreconcilable and therefore require the need for a further examination into Objectivist ethics.

## **2.2 Structure and Movement in *Anthem***

Most of the literary works on *Anthem* have been compiled into the book *Essays on Ayn Rand's Anthem* (Mayhew, 2005). There exist several notable readings of the book. The first is the linguistic analysis into what the word 'I', or lack thereof throughout the book, implies. This is an ethical statement – that of ethical egoism – that Rand was trying to make. But it also means that there is neither the concept of individuality existing nor as a corollary, that thought can be done as a collective; a metaphysical statement arguing that recognition of the self is necessary for rationality (Salmieri, 2005). This coheres very much with Aristotelian ethics, where *eudaimonia* is recognised as understanding the discreteness of the individual, as a means of accessing that rationality for creation.

Another reading is using *Anthem* to demonstrate Rand's commentary on the right to individuality – given that intellectual activity can never be done in the company and



cooperation of every other citizen, as explicitly demonstrated by the immense weight of the rules in the Anthem world. Limiting this freedom to disassociate does not actually mean preventing thought. Rather, it means cutting off its ability to propagate in any and every way, in short making it impossible to think without the intrinsic weight of guilt bearing down upon everyone, through the laws that the Council in the Anthem universe have created (Peikoff, 2005). This ode to Man's ego, therefore, stems from the recognition that Man's rationality ultimately trumps any efforts to limit it.

Yet there are still gaps in Rand's logic within the book, and to answer the tensions between self-interest and self-sacrifice, as well as further understand her philosophical groundings for her ethic of creation, an ethical reading of *Anthem* is necessary.

### 3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Identifying Heroes within *Anthem*

The construction of the hero within *Anthem* is starkly clear from the beginning. By asserting the identity of the narrator from the beginning, Equality 7-2521 (later renaming himself as Prometheus) emphasises his role in his rebellion against the system once the novella opens. While he appears to be conscious of his personhood and has a unique identity by writing details such as “we are twenty-one years old” and “we are six feet tall”, he continues using the pronoun “we”. This creates obvious cognitive dissonance between his supposed recognition of self-identity and his continued identification with the collective. Equality 7-2521 is portrayed growing up as a miserable individual, who “fought against this curse (of intellect)” and “tried to forget our lessons”. Yet this already begins to build the foundations for his eventual desire to rebel. Rand appears to conveniently make a distinction between the intellectual prowess of Equality 7-2521 in comparison to the other children, and in doing so show that he had no choice but to “(understand the lessons) before the Teachers had spoken”. This clear difference in how knowledge is gained appears at odds with her epistemological argument – that of all mankind having the imperative to exercise their rational thought because they know they possess it; rather this romanticises the superior intellect of Equality and that they know they are of Promethean capacity only because they had more intrinsic capabilities than the rest.

It is notable as well, therefore, that at the point of Council of Vocations meeting, Equality did not wish to become a leader. It is almost as if Rand is painting to us this didactic view of what the ideal creator hero should be, that “we wished to be a scholar” was a better or more self-interested view than wishing to be a leader. Rand’s Objectivism only holds insofar as it is innately humanistic; that it emphasises the value of humankind and not a single human. Yet Equality is at every juncture being set apart by no part of his own choice, but by a seeming god-like force acting upon him. He is described as “we had been a good Street Sweeper (...) save for our cursed wish to know”. It is a curious departure from most conceptions of the revolutionary hero – the hero-pigs in *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 2003) was conscious of the plight of all animals, and wanted equality for themselves; the heroes organising the French Revolution in *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1882) were conscious of their collective suffering and wanted more rights. Yet while Objectivism rejects the conception of the supernatural by claiming Man is an end, Equality did not make the conscious decision to accumulate knowledge but is almost superhuman in obtaining this thirst that seems to escape all his peers.

The heroine of *Anthem* is also quickly identified, known as Liberty 5-3000 (otherwise named the Golden One, and finally renamed to Gaea). Yet again, in the same fashion, as Rand constructed Equality, Liberty is the only human in a sea of sub-human entities. Rand pays special attention to humanising her actions as well as beautifying her every attribute. With hair

“(flying) in the wind, shining and wild”, body “straight and thin as a blade of iron” and throwing “seeds from their hand as if (...) designed to fling a scornful gift”, Liberty appears as the only individual possessing distinctly normal human features. Equally notable is how Rand highlights all the traditionally feminine traits of Liberty. Giving her the role of the farmer, just as most patriarchal agricultural societies would be organised, and emphasising her physicality, Liberty is not gifted the same gift of intellect as Equality, but instead gifted with the gift of beauty. Given her role as a complement to Equality, to demonstrate the Objectivist values of rational thought, her character on quite the contrary reflects a paucity of any rational thought observable. Therefore, it seems to come as no surprise when Liberty is later portrayed as a purely sexual character, as when Equality announces Liberty’s beauty, her response is not one of mutual affection, but one of “triumph” – triumph that would seem otherwise out of place if not for the need of affirmation from her partner. When Rand later describes Liberty as “(delivering her body) in submission to our eyes” this gender dynamic is further evinced; clearly departing from Objectivism’s motto of holding the individual in the highest regard. However, the converse can also be true. In demonstrating the strongest suits of both the male and female archetype, Rand is referencing something Aristotle said, that a soul (or the consciousness) is “the actuality of a body that has life”. Aristotle is saying here, that the soul is as much a part of life as the body, and the two are literally indistinguishable. Rand, therefore, is commenting that the ideal person does not exist independent of mind or body, and requires both the feminine notion of an ideal body as well as the male notion of superior intellect to be truly human. In fact, by showcasing Equality and Liberty as the only two individuals that resemble humans while being endowed with god-like capabilities, Rand could be making the statement that humans are essentially gods – gifted with the capacity of thought, not using it would mean that humans lose their humanity; using it would mean that they can be, and are, as powerful as the gods.

The final dimension to the hero’s character (notably not the heroine’s; Liberty plays no role in the invention of the bulb) is the process of self-identification. Rand employs two key tropes here. The first is mind-body dualism, or more accurately Descartes’ conception of substance dualism, where the mental state exists outside the body and the body cannot think (Robinson, 2003). Throughout the book, Equality describes his events through actions and reactions. The poetic prose works precisely because it is a repetitive, almost mechanical analysis of movements. Equality has never stated what he thought or felt. In fact, even when making the revolutionary invention, all that is announced is “We made it”. Equality hints at not being connected to his body, as “we know not what we are saying”, and seems to not have agency over his thoughts. The second trope here is the absolute absence of self-knowledge. Defined as knowledge of one’s sensations, experiences, and propositional attitudes (Gertler, 2011) ;

there is a stark lack of consciousness, as well as no meaningful way of accessing his mind. This manifests in the lack of cognition of intrinsic and extrinsic causality, such as when meeting Liberty. Equality “(did) not know if we drank that water”, and “we did not understand what had made us do this”. Equality also starts taking ownership of himself when “we do care about our body”; “for the wire is a part of our body (...) glowing with our blood”. Crucially, this process of self-identification and rejection of both tropes comes about through the creative process and is facilitated by the product created. It is implied here that the creative process is a physical manifestation of the mind, and through it, the mind contains to retain ownership and identifies the self with one’s consciousness, one’s production, and the means of production – one’s body. Rand shows that there was a transition between the mind and body being discrete entities and notably shows that the mind was to take precedence. Hence it can be derived that the Objectivist ethic of valuing people and product has the assumption that there is intrinsic connection and ownership between one’s identity and one’s invention. Indeed, thus far, the interpretation that best coheres with the heroes set up within *Anthem* is the Promethean hero that is also interlinked between identity and work.

### **3.2 Identifying the Standard of Good within *Anthem***

Rand’s standard of goodness in *Anthem* arises from her hero’s rebellion against the various Councils that govern him, and galvanising sympathy for Equality’s quest; in doing so establishing the clear moral boundaries between good and bad. It is evident that the immoral ones throughout the novella are those that impose their will on the individual; those that restrict the individual’s freedom; and, in Equality’s words, those that worship “we”. These concepts are the key tenets of the government that Equality finds himself within. They are characterised first by the dogma of the collective, and the indoctrination of this into subsequent generations, such that statements of “How else can men be (happy) when they live for their brothers?”, and “if you are not needed by your brother men, there is no reason for you to burden the earth with your bodies” are made. They are further characterised by claiming moral authority by forwarding the “will of our brothers”, and indeed free and general elections are held to determine the World Council. However, while ostensibly running a democracy, they are also subjugating everyone in restricting their actions, speech and even thoughts, while making all decisions for the individual. The governments of *Anthem*, therefore, have extremely tenuous foundations on their claim to power, something Rand clearly wants to highlight as a case for the rejection of the collectivist dream. Rand posits that the governments that appeal to altruism, the community or any version of collectivism is instead a self-serving one that neither enfranchise the individual nor benefit the society. Most importantly, the government in *Anthem* hold a firm grasp on the monopoly of the use of force and exercises it with impunity. It is this government that denies Equality the chance to use, or even possess his invention and by

extension, denies the society any means of accessing their minds and their intellectual capacities.

Therefore, the reverse can be established as the standard of good. A government that protects freedoms; a government that celebrates individual identity; a government that permits and facilitates the pursuit of knowledge; and a government that has appropriate checks on the use of force is a government that is good. The individual that supports said principles, such as Equality, is also constituted as being a good individual. However, what is markedly absent is the logical conclusion between good and moral. While Rand tries to inform what good may represent in terms of what the ideal life and government is, Rand makes little justification for why the rights of man are so important, or why the pursuit of knowledge is necessarily an end in itself. Instead, by making her statement about her ideal human – one that epitomises intellect and beauty – she infers that the ideal human's characteristic is one that should be embodied by all, demonstrating that her ethics is built on a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach. By constructing her hero and heroines so that the nature of man can be determined, her ethical system is justified by reflecting the logical conclusion of such a reality, but glossing over the split between the good and the moral. Thus, this shows her departure from the Übermensch stereotype of prescribed morality, favouring Aristotle's idea that reason happens to be the best way to access happiness, and therefore having similar ethical beliefs.

### **3.3 Critiquing the Objectivist Ethics**

As demonstrated above, Objectivist ethics does not arise through establishing a set of imperatives such as in Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, but rather through the observation of the nature of man. Rand's philosophy operates on the premise of phenomenology by observing that all humankind is rational and capable of creation and production, therefore the ethical conclusion is that Man is obliged to use rational self-interest as a moral framework. However, her works do not support the reading that all man is rational. Indeed, from *Anthem* itself it is already seen that many individuals neither have the rational capacity nor the willingness to use it. On quite the contrary, *Anthem* constructs *dei ex machina* – two individuals with wholly different and unusual characteristics for the situation they are in, presented as the absolute beauty of creation. Discounting the debate on whether Objectivist ethics only apply to the converted or to the majority, her premise – or the way Man is observed to act – is not reflective of reality. Her writing reflects that only a few people behave in the *homo economicus* archetype, therefore creating a situation in which her narrative of Man is divorced from reality. Hence, Objectivist ethics become a form of circular reasoning, in which people ought to be rational creators because they ought to behave according to rational self-interest because they ought to be rational creators.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

Reading *Anthem* to formulate the reasoning behind Objectivism yields several conclusions.

*Anthem* does not answer an important dichotomy that is necessary if Objectivism is to have a clear ethical direction. The apparent tension between the conception of the Promethean hero – sacrifice for communal gain – and the individual interest that she advocates play out even stronger in *Anthem*. Right from the start, it seems as if Equality could have avoided large amounts of unnecessary sacrifice by not acting upon his invention. The only principle motivating him was his ‘godlike’ quest for knowledge, a value unbeknownst to anyone within his society. More perniciously, Rand gets away with including in Equality’s decision-making calculus, perhaps to humanise him, a concern for the people closest to him. These are, *inter alia*, the drive to eventually return to the city to rescue his “chosen friends”; the urge to suddenly feel concern for Liberty and her sexual freedom before she has been taken to the Palace of Mating; or the urge to fight for the freedom of Man.

What Rand seems to be creating, instead, is establishing an ideal life. While distinct from a moral life, given the paucity of a moral framework to establish an imperative, Rand gives a compelling narrative of the lasting spirit and powers of Man to cast away their chains that attach them to their fellow men. Rand instructs the removal of “we” as Man’s primary consideration and instead implores fighting for the freedom of all, to achieve self-actualisation. Instead of treating the notion of rational self-interest as the *a priori* moral end, Rand instead treats the broader form of individualism as the moral end. By making a statement about the ideal human, by painting humans as gods, Rand coheres with Nietzsche one last time, in his statement that “god is dead”. Therefore, Rand may not have created a full ethical system, but Rand has completed her anthem for Man’s ego.

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